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AUTHOR Cazden, Courtney B.
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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the concept of communicative competence (CC) in language learning and teaching is traced since 1966, when D. H. Hymes first discussed it publicly. His concept of CC had its theoretical origins in the convergence of transformational generative grammar and the ethnography of communication, and was first discussed at a conference on language development among disadvantaged children with the implication that "sociolinguistic interference" might be more important for education than dialect differences. Hymes defines competence as capability located in individual persons, and translates Noam Chomsky's concept of underlying shared knowledge as "systemic potential." He distinguished between what is not said because there is no need to say it and what is not said because the individual does not have a way to say it. Competence is viewed as an individual quality, including knowledge of a formal grammatical structure and also knowledge of form/function relationships (appropriateness). The issue of defining appropriateness for pedagogical purposes has stimulated discussion, but in keeping with the contemporary emphasis on the active role of the learner, a definition focusing on the learner's grasp of language for use is gaining ground. Contains 13 references. (MSE)

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COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: 1966-1996

Courtney B. Cazden
Harvard Graduate School of Education
(Cambridge MA 02138; cazdenco@hugse1.harvard.edu)

It is appropriate for AAAL to invite a colloquium on communicative competence (CC) for the 1996 annual meeting, because this is the 30th anniversary of Hymes's first public discussion of that concept. His is not the only origin of the term. As Hymes himself has explained, it was in use independently "in the study of language learning and teaching" (1984, p. 7). Because of the existence of these separate (and not necessarily completely compatible) strands, readers should be attentive to which meanings are being, perhaps implicitly, invoked. Hymes' meanings have been influential in mother tongue education, at least in the U.S., and are the only ones discussed here.

I will give my understanding of Hymes' concept, starting with its first public statement in June 1966 for which John Gumperz and I were both discussants; then connect some contemporary discussions to two concepts that have been part of Hymes' theory: individual capability vs. systemic potential, and appropriateness; and end with brief comments on a theory of pedagogy. I will argue that the emphasis on individual capability is still very useful, but that appropriateness needs to be reconceived.

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History

Hymes' concept of CC had its theoretical origin in "the convergence of two independent developments: that of transformational generative grammar, on the one hand, and that of the ethnography of communication, on the other. The common element has been concern with the abilities of users of language" (Hymes, 1984, Postscript p 1). Hymes agreed with Chomsky's formulation of competence as underlying knowledge but disagreed with how that knowledge should be defined in linguistic theory. Where Chomsky assumed, by definition, that competence is the knowledge shared by all fluent native speakers, Hymes drew on ethnographic research to show variation in the underlying knowledge of individual speaker. And where Chomsky assumed, again by definition, that the only knowledge that counted in linguistic theory was knowledge of formal structure, Hymes argued that such theory also had to account for knowledge about patterns of use.

In addition to this theoretical origin of CC, there was a situational origin, by now probably less well known, in the socio-political scene at the time of its formulation in the mid-1960s. The June 1966 conference at which Hymes first publicly discussed CC was entitled "Research Planning Conference on Language Development among Disadvantaged Children." It was held at the Ferkauf Graduate School of Education in NYC where both Joshua Fishman and Vera John (now Vera John Steiner) were on the faculty. (Hymes, 1972, is the version presented at that conference.) The June public conference was preceeded in the fall

of 1965 by a small invitational conference chaired by Fishman and sponsored by the federal Office of Education to brainstorm needed research on the same topic: how the language of "disadvantaged" children might be implicated in their school success or failure.

There have been enough recent 30-year anniversaries to remind us of what was happening in 1965-66: The Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty were in full swing; Head Start was in its first full year. And his prosecution of the Viet Nam war had not yet made it impossible for President Johnson, who had started out as a school teacher, to go down in history as the "education president". At this time, the only aspect of language that was part of conventional educational thinking as a possible cause of school failure was nonstandard dialect.

This sociopolitical scene may not have been constitutive of the construct of communicative competence in the way that negative response to Chomsky and positive advocacy of the ethnography of speaking were, but that scene may well have affected its form of expression and certainly added to its reception and influence. Already at the June conference, it was obvious that one implication of the idea of CC was the hypothesis that "sociolinguistic interference" might be more important for education than dialect differences.

Individual capability vs. systemic potential

Hymes defines competence with the common sense meaning of capability located in individual persons, not in an abstract non-

material language system. As he put it in 1966, "I should take competence as the most general term for the capabilities of a person....[I]t cannot be assumed that the formal possibilities of a system and individual knowledge are identical" (1972, p 182).

What Chomsky considered the underlying shared knowledge of a language as an abstract system is what Hymes considers only its systemic potential. A description, even explanation, of that systemic potential only describes the resource pool potentially available, but not necessarily even actually available, to individual language acquirers. Where Chomsky assumed homogeneity, Hymes heard variation. (My choice of contrasting verbs--assumed vs. heard--is deliberate, relating their contrasting theories to contrasting research methodologies: intution vs. ethnography.)

In passing, we can note that in this contrast between individually varying capability and a homogeneous systemic potential, Hymes suggests that he was arguing with Halliday as well as Chomsky: "If I understand Halliday correctly, his conception of `meaning potential' would correspond to my `systemic potential" (1984, Postscript, p. 12).

A focus on individual knowledge--so useful in education, it seems to me--entails empirical research about variation in what share of the systemic potential particular individuals actually know. In Hymes' words, underlined in the original, "There is a fundamental difference between what is not said, because there is no occasion to say it, and what is not said, because one does not have a way to say it" (1973), p. 24).

My sense is that Hymes came to his understanding of the importance of such variation through his own research with Native American language users. His most familiar example is Bloomfield's account of a young Menomini:

> White Thunder, a man around 40, speaks less English than Menomini, and that is a strong indictment, for his Menomini is atrocious (1972, p. 273).

For a contemporary statement of the same phenomenon, here is a Chicano author, Luis Rodriguez, writing about himself in his autobiographical book, Always running: La vida loca: Gang days in L.A.:

> I had fallen through the chasm between two languages. The Spanish had been beaten out of me in the early years of school--and I didn't learn English very well either. That was the predicament of many Chicanos (1993, p. 219).

Acknowledging the existence of such extreme individual variation has been controversial among language researchers. A case in point are disagreements about the existence of "semilingualism", for which both White Thunder and Luis Rodriguez could be examples. I don't know whether Hymes has ever commented on the construct of "semilingualism", but it is compatible with his ideas to accept the possibility that material conditions for language socialization can be so severely impoverished that the monolingual or bilingual development of individual communicative competence may be severely reduced.

As evidence of such compatibility, note that the 1973 discussion of CC, published as a Texas Working Paper in Sociolinguistics, has two epigraphs: one from Marx and the other from William Carlos Williams:

> ...he remains in the realm of theory and does not view men in their given social connections, not under their existing conditions of life, which has made them what they are. He never arrives at the really existing active men, but stops at the abstraction `Man'... (Marx, The German Ideology).

> The language is missing them
> they die also
> incomunicado.
> The language, the language
> fails them
> They do not know the words
> or have not
> the courage to use them....(Williams, Patterson)

These epigraphs fit the 19660s' ethos of widespread concern for the real lives and language of the poor and oppressed. The quotation from Marx also forshadows Hymes's critique of Chomsky for speaking as a linguist only of human language potential and not of the conditions limiting human language actuality. (Parenthetically the difference between social life seen as irrelevant by Chomsky vs. constituent by Hymes has seemed to me

related to their different positions on the political left: anarchist in the case of Chomsky, socialist in the case of Hymes.)

Hymes' distinction between individual capability and systemic potential is also related to the distinction, much argued in the 1960s and alive today, between deficit and difference. In the fall of 1995, at the invitation of the Linguistics Program of the National Science Foundation, Walt Wolfram assembled a small group of applied linguists to identify a set of questions that linguistic research could answer as its contribution to the Human Capital Initiative newly launched by the Foundation. The resulting report begins with two examples of past contributions of linguistic research: "clarifying the distinction between language deficit and language difference with respect to the language varieties spoken to minority groups in the United States, especially African-American Vernacular English" and "shaping our understanding of the nature of American Sign Language (ASL) and the language competencies of members of the deaf community" (Wolfram & Shilling-Estes, nd, pp 1, 2).

Clarifying the distinction between deficit and difference is indeed an important contribution of language research. (Cazden, 1966, is an early, pre-CC, research review.) But deficit and difference, I now realize, are not parallel terms, and to assert one does not deny the other. Whereas difference is a description of relationships among language systems, deficit may still be an attribute of the capabilities of individual knowers of any one

system considered relative to other knowers of that system or to particular situational language demands. Heath's (1990) ethnography of the language development of "the children of Trackton's children" is an all too poignant case in point.

One final comment on the individual quality of competence as Hymes defined it. In today's discourse in cognitive science and education, cognition is often described as "distributed". Human knowledge and ability does develop in collaborative interactions with others; and mature abilities of more than one person often combine in "co-constructions" to productive effect. But the currently popular term "distributed cognition" sometimes seems to suggest that we should stop altogether thinking of knowledge as located in the minds of individuals, and consider it located only between minds, in the plural. Hymes' emphasis on individual knowledge in unquestionably "social minds" (Gee, 1992) seems to me a still useful complementary perspective, especially in education.

Appropriateness

In Hymes' definition, CC includes not only knowledge of formal grammatical structure, but knowledge also of form/function relationships learned from the embeddedness of all language use in social life.

The intellectual roots here are less in Hymes' argument with Chomsky and more in his developing program for an ethnography of speaking, the subject of several of his pre-CC writings in the

early 1960s. As a linguistic anthropologist, he argued that both fields omitted attention to fundamental phenomena: linguistics ingored language function, while anthropology paid attention to every other aspect of culture (kinship, religion etc) but ignored as transparent the most important medium in which culture was enacted and acquired by the developing child. In acquiring that medium, each child learns not just what is systemically possible, ie grammatical, but what is culturally appropriate.

Influential as Hymes discussion of appropriateness has been, two criticisms have served to clarify our theoretical understanding of language abilities and our practical programs of language education.

One theoretical controversy is over the fundamental parallelism that Hymes' formulation seems to assume between grammaticality in Chomsky's theory and appropriateness in his own. (See Wortham, 1994, pp. 11-20 for a recent discussion.) Without trying to discuss all the implications of this argument, I want to point out that Hymes does not define appropriateness as only the ability to respond in a pre-existing context; on the contrary, he affirms the importance of human ability to create contexts through language:

> Let me reiterate that speech styles are not mechanical correlations of features of speech with each other and with contexts. The criterion of a <u>significant speech style</u> is that it can be recognized, and used, outside its defining

context, that is, by persons or in places other than those with which its typical meaning is associated (1973, 60).

A related discussion today is about the extent to which cognition is not only "distributed", as discussed above, but also "situated."

To limit competence only to "mechanical correlation" between language and situation would be almost Skinnerian; in emphasizing instead creative, non- situationally determined language use of stylistic knowledge, Hymes seems to parallel Chomsky's emphasis in his famous argument with Skinner on creative, non-situationally determined use of grammatical knowledge.

A second controversy, more central to educational concerns, is that evaluative terms, such as both `grammatical' and `appropriate', beg the question of evaluative criteria. While judging grammaticality may pose problems, such problems escalate when judging appropriateness. By definition, appropriate means in accordance with social norms. But that begs the question of whose norms, and why they should be adhered to.

One linguist forceful on this point is British critical discourse analyst Norman Fairclough. In his edited book on Critical language analysis, Fairclough devotes a chapter to "The appropriacy of `appropriateness'". He begins with the strong claim that "theories of sociolinguistic variation [that center around the concept of appropriateness] are an ideological obstacle to the development of Critical Language Awareness" (p.

35). With examples from the Thacker/Major National Curriculum for English, Fairclough argues more fully as follows:

> [A]ppropriateness models derive from a confusion between sociolinguistic realities and political projects in the domain of language: social order--e.g. a regulated sociolinguistic order corresponding to the notion of appropriateness in which each variety is neatly attached to its particular context and purpose--is the political objective of the dominant, `hegemonic', sections of society in the domain of language as in other domains, but it has never been sociolinguistic reality. Appropriateness models in sociolinguistics or in educational policy documents should therefore be seen as ideologies, by which I mean that they are projecting imaginary representations of sociolinguistic reality which correspond to the perspective and partisan interests of one section of society or one section of a particular social institution--its dominant section....What I want to suggest is that the sociolinguistic order is a domain of hegemonic struggle" (pp 48-49, emphasis in the original).

In any applied intervention, language goals are needed to guide curriculum and teaching. A teacher may be able, carefully and deliberately, to avoid the kind of blind hegemonic assimilation that Fairclough critiques, but one cannot--by the

very nature of the teaching enterprise--avoid the issue of goals altogether.

Many teachers are struggling with this issue, struggling with the tension between a commitment to students' and parents' demand for access to cultural capital on the one hand, and a commitment to their professional awareness of what Fairclough calls the hegemonic struggle on the other hand. One solution being advocated depends on the difference in connotation, and in pedagogical implications, between two pronunciations of the homograph:

> apPROpriate--as an adjective referring to language relative to a situation, as in both Hymes and Fairclough, versus
>
> appropriATE, as a verb, referring to the language user's grasp, even seizure, of a certain kind of language for use.

Note the different nouns for the two meanings:

> appropriateness--the quality discussed by Hymes, vs.
> appropriation--an action of a subject agent.

In keeping with contemporary emphasis on the active role of the learner, use of the latter pronunciation, appropriATE and appropriAtion, seems to be increasing.

In educational discourse: ApPROpriate language use as a goal seems to connote a more assimilationist stance by the teacher, a more "banking" concept of education in Freire's terms, and a more

passive role for the student. AppropriATE, on the other hand, connotes the more active and aware decision on the part of the learner to acquire a certain way with words in full knowledge of conventionally defined, even hegemonic, contexts of use, more and less feasible meanings, and probable perlocutionary effects. Teaching still goes on. But the curriculum is more likely to include a critical look at the norms themselves. Then learners can decide, with more informed consent, so to speak, what they are committed to learning and why.

One clear expression of this shift comes from elementary school teacher/researcher Karen Gallas's reflections on her children's talk about science in her classroom:

> I wanted to understand the ways in which talk might open the world of science to children, a world that was closed to me as a child. As a teacher I had the intuitive understanding, which Bakhtin (1981) has more clearly and completely elaborated, that the essence of gaining competence in a field, of owning "the word," may rest in whether one can "appropriate" the language of that discipline, "populating it with his own intention, his own accent" (p. 294).
>
> "Appropriate," in Bakhtin's context, is used as a verb implying a move toward ownership of the word. It is a powerful verb that emerges from the determination of the individual to take control of a new way of thinking and being. I find it ironic that it is also a

> homonym for a word that can, in another social context, be its antonym, a word that was, unfortunately, much more active in my life as a student of science. I struggled to be "appropriate" in my science classrooms, that is, I labored to look, act, and talk in a way that my teachers would think was correct, or appropriate to the study of science, but in fact I never learned how to participate successfully in that world (1995, p. 2).

Toward a theory of pedagogy

The educational concerns of thirty years ago are still ours today. Shifting the emphasis from dialect differences to sociolinguistic interference, or from appropriateness to appropriation, changes the goals but does not diminish the importance of effective means.

There is no theory of pedagogy in Hymes' writings, and we should not expect it. But for applied work, some guiding theory is essential. In "A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures" (New London Group, 1996), Norman Fairclough, James Gee, seven colleagues from England, Australia and the U.S., and I suggest such a theory--one that can guide our efforts to help students, in Gallas's words, "take control of new ways of thinking and being," and of speaking and writing.

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